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ABSTRACT

This brief paper focuses on where the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field has been and where it is going regarding the studying and teaching of listening comprehension. It reviews in some detail a few of the leading texts in the field: "Building Strategies" by Abbs and Freebairn (1979); "English Firsthand: Gold Edition," Books 1 and 2 by Helgesen, et al. (1999); and the three-book "Active Listening" series by Helgesen et al., "Building Skills for Understanding," "Introducing Skills for Understanding," and "Expanding Understanding through Content" (1994, 1995, and 1996 respectively). A number of other books are also mentioned in the course of discussing these featured texts and in their own right. (Contains 20 references.) (KFT)

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Teaching Listening Comprehension at the Turn of the Century

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Steve Brown

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In response to the conference theme, "Looking Forward by Looking Back," I want to share with you some thoughts about where we've been and where we're going in studying and teaching listening comprehension. I hope you'll forgive my personalizing some of these thoughts. I want to initially look at two textbook series close to me, at *Strategies* (Abbs and Freebairn,1979), which very early on showed me the way to teach communicatively, as well as at two series I've co-authored, *English Firsthand* (Helgesen et al, 1999a, 1999b) and *Active Listening*(Helgesen and Brown, 1994, 1995, Helgesen, Brown and Smith, 1996). I'll begin by directly comparing *Strategies* and *English Firsthand.*

First of all, I am struck by the difference in the amount of space given to listening in the two books. In *Building Strategies*, this is the listening task:

> John is British, but he has worked in Japan. Etsuko is Japanese from Osaka, but she is studying in Britain. Listen to them comparing life as they see it in the two countries. Make notes about the features of each country they mention and the comparisons they make.

The follow-up task is: "Write paragraphs using your notes, like this: John says that, in his experience, the ... Etsuko says that, in her experience, the ..." (Abbs & Freebairn, 1979, p.92). In *English Firsthand 1*, there is one entire page devoted to pre-listening or "Getting Ready." The first exercise asks learners to match sentences with responses (May I help you? I'm looking for some jeans.). The learners listen and check their answers. The second exercise is a guessing activity. Students first guess the price of the items they will hear about in the listening task, and then note if they have ever bought that item. The purpose of guessing the price is to make students aware of the range of possible answers, so that they don't answer $250 instead of $25. The purpose of asking if they have ever bought the item is personalization of the activity (Helgesen et al., 1999a, p.90).

Strategies encouraged note taking. That's still an important skill, but most books these days provide for a quick check/circle/write one word sort of task. Tasks provide feedback for both learners and teachers and they are (at least somewhat) more like the real world, where we are most likely not to take extensive notes but to write down the starting time of a movie or a phone number as a result of listening. Of course, students can also be writing to reflect on their learning; for example, when students are writing words in *English Firsthand* and in *Active Listening*, they are likely to be writing them in response to the prompt, "How did you know?" This focus on task-based listening with extensive pre-listening tasks is clearly an area of difference between the two books, and a measure of the growth of listening comprehension.

Over the last twenty years, ELT has forged a consensus on the importance of developing listening skills. The model of listening that we have adopted is one from cognitive psychology. We see the brain as limited in its processing abilities, and we try to ease the processing burdens, for instance, by activating prior knowledge. I like to use as an example of prior knowledge's amazing power my experience buying postcards at an Austrian museum. I speak no German, but walked up to the counter after having calculated that the postcards would cost sixteen schillings. I gave the clerk a twenty-schilling note, she opened the till, looked in it, and said something in German. As a

reflex, I dug in my pocket and produced a one-schilling coin and gave it to her. She smiled and handed me "a five." I managed the transaction based on my prior knowledge of how one deals with change at a store. In some sense, I didn't need German. I just needed my life experience. Later on that same trip, however, I did need to manage a transaction "bottom-up" when I asked at the Madrid train station for tickets west and was answered by the word "huelga." There had been a wildcat strike that morning. Here, the "getting tickets" routine failed and I needed words, just one, in this case, to understand what was going on. (It's very hard to separate the two kinds of processing. "Huelga" came out of my prior experience working with farm workers, and not through a Spanish class).We now try to develop both kinds of listening in our students and we try to use pre-listening activities to remind them of what they know about the situations they will hear.

This view of listening sees listening comprehension as being basically the same as reading comprehension and our practices have been very similar: in a typical lesson, we have "pre" activities, "while" activities and "post" activities. Pre-listening or schema activation is key. Framing the task is key. However, we know that, despite our practice, listening is a bit different. Listening must be done in real time. It involves phonological features. There are false starts and hesitations to be dealt with. In the past, at least, we have tended to think of listening as more interactive than reading, though that notion has since disappeared as we adopt a more active conception of reading.

In one of the few direct comparisons of reading and listening, Lund (1991) found readers recalled more detail. Listeners recalled proportionately more main ideas and did more inferencing. Lund argues that listeners might benefit from additional training in inferencing and in listening for cues to confirm or disconfirm .

I don't have time to fully develop this, but it may be that academic listening and reading have more in common with each other than either has with its non-academic counterpart. The focus on academic contexts in research up to now may have skewed our thinking on this topic. Consider these differences between lectures and conversations (Flowerdew, 1994, p.11):

> the difference in the type of background information needed
> the difference in Gricean rules, what's relevant in each context
> the differences in turn-taking
> the differences in the kind and number of speech acts
> the differences in demands made in processing
> the kinds of tasks accomplished

Given this background of "listening as reading," many have started to wonder if we have privileged top-down processing at the expense of bottom-up processing. Here are the microskills involved in listening, as presented in Rost (1990, p.152):

1. "Recognizing prominence within utterances"
   (examples: recognizing phonemes; strong and weak forms; reductions; stress; pitch)

2. "Formulating propositional sense for a speaker's utterance"
   (examples: deducing meanings of unknown words; infering)

3. "Formulating a conceptual framework that links utterances"
   (examples: utilizing discourse markers; constructing main ideas)

4. "Integrating plausible intention(s) of the speaker in making the utterance"
   (examples: recognizing changes in tempo and pitch; identifying ambiguity)

5. "Utilizing representation of discourse to make appropriate response"
   (examples: note-taking; identifying needed clarification)

I'm struck how many of these microskills, perhaps by definition, are bottom-up skills. If we look at materials published within the last twenty years, we see the ignoring of many skills like identifying pitch. As we think of a new edition of *Active Listening*, we've begun to look at what's been left out. Judy Gilbert (1995), for example, shows some possible connections between pronunciation work and bottom-up listening. We think this is more than yet another pendulum swing. The profession has always looked at bottom-up processing. We're now more carefully looking at bottom-up *in context*. For me, this is captured nicely by the distinction between simple dictation and the sort of dictation done in dictogloss, in which students use their pooled prior knowledge to build up the dictation, rather than take it down verbatim (Wajnryb, 1990).

Another set of skills we don't think of as "listening" are those concerned with interpersonal listening. Of course, we put students in pairs and they talk to each other, but most of what goes on in listening materials is "CIA English," English overheard and noted (What time is Ms. Smith's doctor's appointment?). We've tried to go beyond that in *English Firsthand* with the section we call "About you." In that section, the tape asks students direct questions and they write down the answers. It's also a big part of *Active Listening* tasks in which the tape talks to the students and they follow its directions (e.g., Helgesen et al., 1999a, p.13, Helgesen and Brown, 1995, p. 11).

We know from research on input simplification versus elaboration that in many cases elaboration is more facilitative of comprehension. Parker and Chaudron (1987, cited in Chaudron, 1988) found linguistic simplification helped comprehension, but not consistently. Elaborative modifications (redundancy, paraphrase, synonyms) did help, as did those that made the theme prominent (extraposition and cleft construction), but subsequent studies suggested that the help may occur at a certain threshold. If input exceeds that threshold, little helps. Studies in reading (Beck et al. 1984) have shown that presenting a text with clearly linked ideas is more beneficial (i.e., leads to greater comprehension) than simplifying the text's language (see also Long and Ross, 1993). Elaboration led to improved comprehension, even when it increased the grade level of the reading.

One way materials developers respond to these findings is by building in redundancy to their scripts. There are other ways. Rubin (1994) reviews a number of studies that find hesitation and pausing enhance comprehension.

We also know that interactionally modified input is more comprehensible than simplified input (though we may still wonder whether it is the sheer quantity that's helping and not the quality of the input). Yet we do a relatively poor job, it seems to me, of letting students hear interactionally modified input if we make listening

comprehension class all about listening to a tape. For this reason, I don't see how we can separate listening and speaking classes in language institutes.

The reason for ignoring interactional listening lies partly is the maintenance of the conduit metaphor. Messages are sent and received, or sent and misunderstood. Clearly, this is not the whole story. As Bakhtin (1986) reminds us, the message is co-constructed between the interlocutors. We need to know more about the sociocultural work of listening. We're beginning to get some interesting studies. One is the work done in Europe summarized in *Achieving Understanding* (Bremer et al., 1996) which shows us how listening exists within a cultural context. My favorite example is that of Abdelmalek, a Moroccan living in France who goes to the travel agency to get a ticket to return to Morocco. When the agent asks him, "Par quoi vous voulez partir?" (How do you want to travel?) he hears "Pourquoi vous voulez partir?"" (Why...?) and begins to explain to the agent that his father is ill. This confuses the agent, but for Abdelmalek, who has been asked any number of intrusive questions by French bureaucrats, it makes perfect sense to explain himself. Another recent ethnographic study of listening is by Tony Lynch, who follows the progress over a short intensive course of "Kazu," a Japanese student. Kazu made marked improvement on one-way listening, but left the course (and started his academic program) still deficient in two-way listening. Lynch (1997, p. 397) concludes,

> for a learner ... to be able to handle the complex social processes of conversational two-way listening requires more than better knowledge of English and better one-way listening skills; it also requires fine interpersonal judgement as to how far you can task your interlocutors' tolerance by asking for repetition, clarification, and all the other things we recommend as good two-way listening strategies.

Lynch's work also reminds us of the importance of individual differences. The assumption of many in the field has been that one of the key areas where individual differences come into play is through strategy use. One of the best studies I know that shows clearly that strategy use improves listening comprehension is Thompson and Rubin (1996). They showed that teaching small groups of American students (learning Russian) cognitive strategies like predicting content and listening for redundancies, as well as metacognitive strategies like planning and defining goals, led to improvement by the experimental group on listening comprehension tests. One aspect of strategy use that may well need further study in light of Just and Carpenter's (1992) work on language processing while reading is the development of strategies to improve memory. Just and Carpenter claim that individual differences in processing are a function of working memory. People who have good working memories have more processing space and are more efficient readers. At present, there seems to be no work in this area in listening and it is unclear whether strategy use could have any effect on short-term memory (as opposed to long-term storage) but it's something worth considering.

What, then, are the main issues facing listening in the next five years? I think we need to expand the paradigm, looking at both smaller and larger issues than we have before now. I think we need to think more seriously about bottom-up listening; this will include thinking seriously about memory and other processing issues. At the other

extreme. we need to expand our view of listening to accommodate larger socio-cultural concerns.

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